DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 427 517 FL 025 689

AUTHOR Koike, Dale April; Hinojosa, Fanny
TITLE A Discourse Approach to the Assessment of Foreign Language Oral Proficiency.
ISSN ISSN-0898-8471
PUB DATE 1998-00-00
NOTE 19p.; For the complete volume of working papers, see FL 025 687.
PUB TYPE Journal Articles (080) -- Reports - Research (143)
JOURNAL CIT Texas Papers in Foreign Language Education; v3 n3 p33-50 Fall 1998
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Discourse Analysis; *Language Proficiency; Language Research; *Language Tests; Second Language Learning; *Second Languages; Simulation; *Spanish; Student Evaluation; Testing
IDENTIFIERS *Oral Proficiency Testing; Texas Oral Proficiency Test

ABSTRACT

A study examined the varying degrees to which learners of Spanish at the intermediate and advanced levels use paragraph-like structure in their answers during a simulated oral proficiency exam. Subjects were 24 students preparing for the Spanish Texas Oral Proficiency Test. Data from simulated oral proficiency interviews were compared to a model template reflecting the organization of most advanced-level learners for this task. Analysis reveals that the advanced learners provided more propositions and supporting statements, closely following the proposed model. Intermediate students provided fewer propositions and supporting statements, and either do not complete the paradigm or begin to diverge from their original intent. The less proficient students usually worked at the level of the single proposition with single supporting statement, and used other strategies to compensate for their difficulties. It is proposed that the template approach be used in the assessment of foreign language oral proficiency in the classroom, since it can reveal more of the global expression of ideas, as contrasted with the evaluation of discrete items such as verb conjugation and agreement errors. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

A Discourse Approach to the Assessment of Foreign Language Oral Proficiency

DALE APRIL KOIKE, The University of Texas at Austin
FANNY HINOJOSA, Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León, Monterrey

ED 427 517

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Carpenter

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

FL 025687

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

A Discourse Approach to the Assessment of Foreign Language Oral Proficiency

DALE APRIL KOIKE, The University of Texas at Austin
FANNY HINOJOSA, Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León, Monterrey

This study examines the varying degrees to which learners of Spanish at the Intermediate and Advanced levels use paragraph-like structure in their answers during a simulated oral proficiency examination. We compare the structure of the data to a model template that reflects the organization of most Advanced-level learners for this task. An analysis reveals that the Advanced learners in the study provide more propositions and supporting statements to complete the paradigm, closely following the proposed model. The Intermediate testees provide fewer propositions and supporting statements and either do not complete the paradigm or begin to diverge from their original intent. The less proficient speakers usually work at the level of the single proposition with single supporting statement, and they use other strategies to attempt to compensate for their deficiencies. We propose that the template approach be used in the assessment of foreign language oral proficiency in the classroom, since it can reveal more of the global expression of ideas, as opposed to the evaluation of discrete items such as verb conjugation and agreement errors.

INTRODUCTION

The focus on communicative activities in the foreign language classroom that allow learners to use the target language in meaningful, interactive, and engaging ways has made a profound impact on the way classes are taught, on expectations on the part of teachers and learners, on the content and format of textbooks, and on the organization of class time and environment. It has inspired a change in the way we assess language proficiency in a global sense, seen for example in the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Oral Proficiency Interview. What is still lacking is a reliable, valid, and time- and cost-efficient form of testing that can be used in the foreign language classroom and that truly reflects the communicative goals that are set out for the learners.

A proficiency test is not particularly useful for course assessment because it is not bound to the curriculum and does not "cover a pre-established body of content assigned beforehand" (Higgs, 1987, p. 284). Its purpose is to measure a testee's performance against what a native speaker might be expected to say in the same situation. Higgs states that the proficiency test is not an appropriate tool for rank ordering a group of students, since the ratings represent *ranges* of performance and cannot be used productively to make fine distinctions seen in grading systems in this country. The interviewer notes *patterns* of strengths and weaknesses instead of individual right or wrong answers.

This type of test format is not intended to examine discrete points, but rather integrative efforts to express a meaningful whole message.

Teachers can also use an achievement test, which covers an explicit, finite amount of content and is intended to rank the students who take the exam. The typical achievement test tends to target discrete points of grammar and vocabulary, but the problem, as Higgs states, is that "the emphasis in achievement tests is almost always exclusively on form rather than function, on being correct rather than having something interesting, important, or true to say" (p. 283). Certainly it is the goal of the classroom test to cover what is taught. In a skill-focused class such as an advanced conversation course, what is taught is a number of ways in which learners can improve their fluency in the speaking skill, whether the improvement be in terms of vocabulary, grammar, organization, or simply increased opportunity to speak in the target language. The ultimate goal is an increase in overall proficiency, which is difficult to pinpoint in terms of an achievement test.

Another option is the "prochievement test," a hybrid test that elicits discrete points of grammar and vocabulary within the context of some kind of oral interview format. It is our belief that such a test, as currently defined, is not the answer for the conversation course. The prochievement test, at least as described by Hendrickson (1992), is still achievement oriented in that it is not aimed at assessing a body of discourse in a holistic way, since the focus is still on whether or not a testee uses a given set of items in responding to a stimulus.

We will describe in this study a method of assessment of ongoing development for the upper-level Spanish conversation course, a course in which the focus is the organization of learner's discourse. We will show that, by looking at the structure of the discourse, one can see the learner's production in a more constructive, top-down, performance-based way, and the more discrete points of grammar are contextualized in meaningful communication.

To this end, we present our research questions, data from various testees at the Intermediate and Advanced levels, and an analysis of these data. We conclude with some suggestions for oral proficiency assessment in the advanced conversation class.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The questions addressed in this study are the following:

1. What differences are seen in discourse structure produced by various learners at Intermediate and Advanced levels of Spanish proficiency on a simulated oral proficiency exam?

2. What is the applicability of a structure-focused oral proficiency exam for classroom purposes?

METHODOLOGY OF DATA COLLECTION

To answer these questions, data were collected from an oral proficiency test used in an advanced Spanish conversation course. The

following is a description of the test instrument, the testees, and the data collection and analysis procedure.

The Test Instrument

The data for this study are drawn from a practice simulated oral proficiency exam administered in a language laboratory at the end of a semester-long advanced Spanish conversation course aimed at preparing potential Spanish language teachers of the elementary and high school levels to take the Spanish Texas Oral Proficiency Test (TOPT). This test is required of all prospective elementary and secondary Spanish and bilingual education teachers in the state of Texas, and they must be rated according to their performance on the test at the Advanced level to pass and receive certification to teach. The practice tests, given in the Spanish-American variety of Spanish, were created to simulate as closely as possible the content, functions, and format of the TOPT (Stansfield, 1993; Stansfield & Kenyon, 1992). A difference between the practice and live TOPT that should be noted is that, on the practice tests, testees are usually given 2 minutes to answer each question, approximately 30 seconds more than on the typical Advanced-level question.

This study focuses on one stimulus that presumably requires more linguistic skill than others and is considered to be of the Advanced level: specifically, that of comparing advantages and disadvantages. Successful performance on this task is considered to be indicative of the Advanced level of proficiency according to the ACTFL Guidelines. The actual stimulus used is given below:

Stimulus:

> While talking with some of your friends in Mexico, one of them says that people should use bicycles as their major means of transportation, while another friend says that motorcycles would solve many problems. Then the others present turn to you. *Present your position logically by comparing advantages and disadvantages* of the bicycle/motorcycle issue. (20-second pause) (Prompt: *¿Y tú? ¿Qué crees?* 'And what do you think?')

As in the original version of the TOPT, testees heard the test stimuli in English over a headset in individual language laboratory booths and recorded their answers in Spanish onto individual audio cassette tapes. The tapes were graded by the instructor for features such as fluency, grammar, vocabulary, and appropriateness of language, but mainly for organization, as part of the final grade for the course.

Testees

Since the 24 testees were students enrolled in a course designed to prepare them to take the TOPT, one can assume that, at the point in the course at which data were collected, these testees were more skilled at taking this kind of test than the average testee. All the testees in this study were estimated to be at least at the Intermediate level of oral proficiency, according to the ACTFL Guidelines (1997). Each

learner was screened for an approximate proficiency level and other background factors (for example, true intent to take the TOPT) by the instructor before being allowed to register for the course. The group included six Hispanic Americans, two of whom were estimated to be at the Advanced level.

The course these learners were enrolled in focused on helping them prepare for the TOPT by working on rhetorical structure and organizational skills, and, most of all, by practicing the language functions and the format of the test. The learners typically were very motivated to work hard in the class and took the testing procedures seriously since they needed to pass the TOPT in order to qualify for a teaching job.

Data Collection and Analysis

In order to look at the organization of the discourse produced by the testees, we compared their responses to two models of how a logical, top-down organizational structure of propositions and supporting statements might appear in the task of comparing advantages and disadvantages. These models were compiled from our overall impression of what many native speakers of Spanish do to complete this task, and what most Advanced and Advanced High speakers appear to be attempting to do when they answer under these test conditions.

Table 1 illustrates both of the two models. Table 1A shows a listing strategy, by which the testee lists several advantages and disadvantages of a given referent before doing the same for the second referent. The supportive statements in parentheses indicate possible examples and other elaboration for those points. Table 1B provides a contrasting strategy, by which the testee gives the advantages of a referent and follows with a contrastive statement of the disadvantages of the other referent. Then the testee gives the advantages of the second referent and follows with another contrastive statement of the disadvantages of the first referent. In both models the paradigm of giving both advantages and disadvantages is completed, followed by a statement of the testee's opinion as to which referent is perceived as better. One can assume that the more the testees complete the paradigm in a logical progression, give points of comparison or contrast, and support those points with examples and other elaboration, the more complete and well presented the discourse will be. One can also assume that the ability to do this is linked to proficiency in the target language.

The transcription of each testee's response was analyzed with respect to the presentation of a topic sentence, advantages and disadvantages with supporting statements, and other elaboration, as well as any concluding remarks. Each of the investigators completed her own analysis of the data, which was then compared to the other's. Discrepancies were discussed after all data were analyzed.

RESULTS

We begin our presentation of the results with sample replies from three testees who illustrate different levels of responses, followed by a brief discussion of what we found in

Table 1
Models of Propositional Organization for Comparing
Advantages and Disadvantages

Model 1A - Listing Strategy

Topic sentence: Being a woman has advantages and disadvantages over being a man

Advantage 1 of X: Women are more intelligent
Advantage 2 of X: Women are more sensitive

Disadvantage 1 of X: Women are not as physically strong
(Support: You don't see as many women in professions requiring physical strength)
Disadvantage 2 of X:

Advantage 1 of Y: Men are strong and tend to be more assertive.
Advantage 2 of Y: Men are more independent.
(Support: They get to do more because they don't feel so dependent on others to act)

Disadvantage 1 of Y: Men are not as intelligent.
Disadvantage 2 of Y:

Conclusion: It is more advantageous to be a woman.

Model 1B - Contrastive Strategy

Topic sentence: Being a woman has advantages and disadvantages over being a man

Advantage 1 of X: Women are more intelligent
Advantage 2 of X: Women are more sensitive

Disadvantage 1 of Y: Men are insensitive
Disadvantage 2 of Y: Men think they know everything

Advantage 1 of Y: Men are physically stronger
(Support: Men can lift heavy things)
Advantage 2 of Y: Men are more independent

Disadvantage 1 of X: Women are not as physically strong
Disadvantage 2 of X: Women take too long to get ready in the morning

Conclusion: Still, it's more advantageous to be a woman than a man.

them as compared to our models. We then discuss categories seen in the corpus as a whole and conclude with some implications for classroom use.

According to the structural quality of responses to the rather difficult test item, the testees were divided into three general groups: very complete answers, fairly complete, and skeletal, with discrepancies noted within each of the groups. An example of a very complete answer is that of Grace, as shown in Example 1:

Example 1. Grace's Reply: Comparing Advantages and Disadvantages [2]:

1 Grace: Pienso que, usando una bicicleta o una motocicleta los dos tienen, aventajas y desventajas.
2 Una mayor, aventaja para la bicicleta pienso es que, la bicicleta es muy bien para el ambiente.
3 El bicicleta no, no sale, no: saca humo ni nada y es, eso es muy bien. Y pienso que también la bici-
4 cleta es bien para, para hacer ejer=ciciosØ. (Uh, una: aventaja para la motocicleta, será, sería
5 que, ((sniff)) es muy pequeña, y no, nece—no: (0.5) tiene, no es tan grande como un carro. Pero una
6 desventaja de: la motocicleta es que no es bien para el ambiente. Y las motocicletas hacen mucho
7 ruido. Pienso yo que, la mejor idea sería usar una bicicleta porque, la bicicleta >pienso que
8 tiene< más, aventajas, que la, que la motocicleta.>La bicicleta te puede dar< ejercicios, (0.5) te
9 puede llevar a muchos lugares una, una desventaja de la bicicleta a lo mejor sería que, el tiempo.
10 Que en una moticicleta llegarías en un lugar como en diez minutos, pero por bicicleta a lo mejor,
11 (0.5) neces—vas a necesitar más tiempo, para llegar adonde necesitas llegar y, a lo mejor si hace
12 mucho calor afuera, vas a sudar y, a lo mejor eso no es, no es una manera de, de, transportación
13 para Ud. So: pienso que a lo mejor la motocicleta será, una: (0.3) teng—tenga una aventaja para
14 las personas que necesitan llegar a lugares, con aprisa o no, o no necesita-o no tienen que, no
15 tienen el tiempo para, para gastar en una bicicleta.

'I think that, using a bicycle or a motorcycle the two have, advantages and disadvantages. A greater, advantage for the bicycle I think is that, the bicycle is very fine for the environment. The bicycle doesn't, doesn't leave, doesn't let out smoke or anything and it is, that is very fine. I think that also the bicycle is fine for, for doing exercise. Uh, an, advantage for the motorcycle, will be, would be, is it's very small, and doesn't nee-doesn't have, isn't as big as a car. But a disadvantage of, the motorcycle is that it isn't fine for the environment.

And motorcycles make a lot of noise. I think that, the best idea would be to use a bicycle because, the bicycle I think that it has more, advantages, than the, than the motorcycle. The bicycle can give you exercises, can take you to many places a, a disadvantage of the bicycle probably would be that, the time. That on a motorcycle you would arrive to a place like in ten minutes, but by bicycle probably, you nee—you are going to need more time, to arrive where you need to arrive and, probably if it's very hot outside, you're going to sweat and, probably that isn't, isn't a means of of transportation for you. So, I think that probably the motorcycle will be, a, may—may have an advantage for the people who need to get to places, hurriedly or not, or don't nee—or don't have to, don't have the time to, to waste on a bicycle.' [3]

Table 2 shows a structural analysis of Grace's response. Numbers represent the order in which the main propositions appeared, while the words in parentheses represent elaborations or supporting statements. Grace gave a general, organizing statement at the beginning of her reply, stated several advantages and disadvantages for both bicycles and motorcycles, contrasting positive and negative points, and provided several supporting statements. She was also able to make a summarizing statement in her final sentence (Lines 13-15). Grace's discourse approximates the model given in Table 1B (Contrastive Strategy) for comparing advantages and disadvantages.

Table 2
Grace's Propositional Organization for Comparing Advantages and Disadvantages

Topic sentence: *Los dos tienen aventajas y desventajas* 'Both have advantages and disadvantages'

Advantage 1 of bicycles: *No saca humo* 'It doesn't let off smoke'

Advantage 2 of bicycles: *Es bien para hacer ejercicios* 'It's fine for doing exercise'

Advantage 1 of motorcycles: *Es muy pequeña (No es tan grande como un carro)* 'It's very small (It isn't as big as a car)'

Disadvantage 1 of motorcycles: *No es bien para el ambiente* 'It is not fine for the environment'

Disadvantage 2 of motorcycles: *Hacen mucho ruido.* 'They make a lot of noise'

(Continued)

Table 2 *(Continued)*

Topic sentence 2: *La bicicleta tiene más aventajas que la motocicleta* 'The bicycle has more advantages than the motorcycle'

Advantage 3 of bicycles: *Te puede llevar a muchos lugares* 'It can take you to many places'

Disadvantage 1 of bicycles: *El tiempo. (Vas a necesitar más tiempo)* 'The time (You are going to need more time)'
Disadvantage 2 of bicycles: *Vas a sudar.* 'You're going to sweat'

Conclusion: *Motocicleta tenga una aventaja para las personas que necesitan llegar a lugares con aprisa* 'Motorcycle has an advantage for the people who need to get to places in a hurry'

Let's look now at Example 2, the response by a student named Mary who provided a good reply, reflective of the "fairly complete" group, but one not as tightly structured as that of Grace's:

Example 2. Mary's Reply for Comparing Advantages and Disadvantages:

1 Mary: Entonces, uh, >mis amigos<, creo que, uh, la bicicleta es, es la solución, uh, mejor, para el
2 problema de viajar. Porque, uh, creo que la bicicleta? Uh, no da, uh más palus–, polución, a la
3 ciudad, en México, y, um el, la, motocicleta, sí, um da, la, polución, um, el. Aunque la bi—la mo-
4 tocicleta es, es más rápido, um, para viajar, la (bicicleta (no requiere, uh, no requiere tiempo o
5 dinero, o demasiado tiempo o dinero para arreglar y para segurar que, uh, está funcionada, uh,
6 todo el tiempo. Um (0.5) uh, (0.5) m-me gusta la bicicleta más, uh, >creo que< la bicicleta uh, es,
7 la, uh, es la selección, uh, mejor para una ciudad como ésa? Uh. Y, um, (2 sec.) Y uh, necesitamos
8 pensar en que, uh, en que más razones para eso. Um, ((laugh)) uh, la polución y la arreglación,
9 um, y uh. También la bicicleta da más ejercicio, um, a la persona que monta? Que lo monta? La
10 monta. Um, y la motocicleta no da, uh, ejercicio porque en la motocicleta, uh, solamente uh, so-
11 lamente: una persona se sienta, en eso.

'So, uh, my friends, I think that, uh, the bicycle is, is the, uh, better, solution, for the problem of traveling. Because, uh, I think that the bicycle? Uh, doesn't give, uh, more pollu—pollution, to the city, in Mexico, and um the, the motorcycle, does, um, give, the, pollution, um, the. Although the bi—the motorcycle is, is faster, um, for traveling, the bicycle, doesn't require, uh, doesn't require time or money, or too much time or money to fix and to be sure that, uh, it is working, uh, all the time. Um, uh, I—I like the bicycle more, uh, I think that, the bicycle uh, is, the, uh, is the best, uh, option for a city like this one? Uh. And um. And uh, we need to think about, uh, about more reasons for this. Um, (laughter), uh, the pollution and the fixing, um, and uh. Also the bicycle gives more exercise, um, to the person who rides? Who rides it? Rides it. Um, and the motorcycle doesn't give, uh, exercise because on the motorcycle, uh, just, uh, a person just sits, on it.'

Mary's sample, formulated more in terms of stating and supporting an opinion than listing advantages and disadvantages, shows much repetition, very little elaboration, no disadvantages for bicycles, and no concluding statement. The lack of a concluding statement, however, was not uncommon in the responses. Because the testees had only 2 minutes to speak and were cut off when the time limit was reached, and because most were not watching a clock while speaking, but instead were concentrating on their responses, few actually produced a complete "paragraph" in terms of having a beginning and an end.

If one looks at the way in which Mary changed the task to that of giving and supporting an opinion, however, it is evident that she was aware that she needed to support her opinion with reasons (Lines 7-11). In other words, she demonstrated her knowledge of an organizational structure, albeit for a different task, but had trouble filling it in. Thus, Mary's paradigm is not that of our proposed model for comparing advantages and disadvantages. She performed well in the organizational structure of her points, but according to a different model with a different function, that of stating and supporting an opinion, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3
Mary's Propositional Organization for Comparing Advantages and Disadvantages

Topic sentence: *La bicicleta es la solución mejor para el problema de viajar*
'The bicycle is the best solution for the problem of traveling'

(Continued)

Table 3 *(Continued)*

Advantage 1 of bicycle: *La bicicleta no da más polución* 'The bicycle doesn't give more pollution'

Disadvantage 1 of motorcycle: *La motocicleta sí da la polución* 'The motorcycle does give pollution'

Advantage 1 of motorcycle: *La motocicleta es más rápido* 'The motorcycle is faster'

Advantage 2 of bicycle: *La bicicleta no requiere tiempo o dinero* 'The bicycle doesn't require time or money'

Conclusion (?): *Me gusta la bicicleta más* 'I like the bicycle more'

--*Necesitamos más razones* 'We need more reasons'

Advantage 3 of bicycle: *La bicicleta da más ejercicio* 'The bicycle gives more exercise'

Disadvantage 2 of motorcycle: *La motocicleta no da ejercicio* 'The motorcycle doesn't give exercise'*(Una persona solamente se sienta)* ('A person just sits')

Conclusion: ---

The response from Deb (Example 3), who is a much less proficient speaker than the other two, illustrates a much more fragmented and less cohesive structure, typical of the "skeletal group," as seen in Table 4.

Deb's reply for comparing advantages and disadvantages begins with two general statements that were probably intended to contrast with each other, but do not do so (Lines 1-3). They seemingly organize

Example 3. Deb's Reply for Comparing Advantages and Disadvantages

1 Deb: Bueno (1.0). Hay dos, dos cosas. Uno es que, que la gente debe montar, a una: bicicleta, para:

2 para: trans—la transporta≠ción,Ø uh, y: otro es, los motocicletas son mejores, o mejor manera,

3 una me—jor, una mejora manera, de, de, de (0.5) transpor—te, de transportación. Y, y creo que,

4 que, los, las bicicletas son más sanas para el ambiente. Y, y: no hacen, humo, ni nada en en el
5 aire. Y, eso es una, buen característica porque: estamos en Mej—en la ciudad de México, donde: el
6 humo y todo de: de la industria es, (0.5) uh, malísima. Y: los motocicletas, uh, tienen, tienen,
7 ventajas? Y desventajas también. Las ventajas son que: que es una: (0.2) un, un tipo, una tipa de
8 transportación más rápida, y toda la gente puede: puede uh, (0.5) movar o, o, (0.5) sí, más
9 rápida. Más rápido. Y, la, la otra cosa es que: la gente no suda, cuando, cuando monta una moto-
10 cicleta. En, en una bicicleta sí, todos sudan. Y ésa es una, una, buen, buena aventaja, para todos
11 los que trabajen.

'Well. There are two, two things. One is that, that people should ride, a bicycle, for, for, trans—transportation, uh, and, the other is, motorcycles are better, or a better means, a better, a better means, of, of, of, transport, of transportation. And, and I think that, that, the, the bicycles are healthier for the environment. And, and, they don't make, smoke, or anything in the air. And, that is a, good characteristic because, we are in Mex-, in Mexico City, where, the smoke and all of, of the industry is, uh, really bad. And, the motorcycles, uh, have, have, advantages? And disadvantages too. The advantages are that, that it is a, a type, a type of faster transportation, and all the people can, can uh, move or, or, yes, more quickly. More quickly. And the, the other thing is that, people don't sweat, when, when they ride a motorcycle. On, on a bicycle yes, everyone sweats. And that is a, a good, good advantage, for all of those who work.'

Table 4
Deb's Propositional Organization for Comparing
Advantages and Disadvantages

Topic sentence: *Hay dos cosas: (a) la gente debe montar una bicicleta para transportación; (b) los motocicletas son mejor manera de transportación*
'There are two things: (a) people should ride a bicycle for transportation; (b) motorcycles are a better means of transportation'

Advantage 1 of bicycles: *Son más sanas para el ambiente* 'They are healthier for the environment'
(No hacen humo) ('They don't make smoke')
(Es una buen característica porque estamos en la ciudad de México) ('It is a good characteristic because we are in Mexico City')

(Continued)

Table 4 *(Continued)*

Topic sentence 2: *Los motocicletas tienen ventajas y desventajas también.* 'Motorcycles have advantages and disadvantages also'

Advantage 1 of motorcycles: *Una tipa de transportación más rápida.* 'A kind of faster transportation'
(La gente puede movar más rápida) ('People can move more quickly')
(La gente no suda) ('People don't sweat')

Disadvantage 1 of bicycles: *Todos sudan* 'Everyone sweats'

[Referring to Advantage 1 of motorcyles above] *Esa una buena aventaja para todos los que trabajen.* 'It is a good advantage for all those who work'

Conclusion: ---

the answer by stating the two points she wants to elaborate. She does give details on why people should ride bicycles (Lines 3-6), but instead of elaborating on why motorcycles are a better means of transportation, she goes on to say that they have advantages and disadvantages (Lines 6-7). She only states the advantages, however. She shows a notion of structure in her reply, but the content of her answer, what she actually says in terms of propositions, interferes with the unity of the sample, making it difficult to follow. In addition to her structural problems, she reveals a definite lack of key vocabulary and shows problems with agreement, which she self-corrects. All of these problems contribute to her difficulty in expressing many propositions and supporting statements (see Table 4).

Thus, the three examples reflect distinct levels of structural quality of answers in our data: complete, fairly complete, and skeletal. The groups are especially distinguishable when matched against an ideal model that represents a complete and coherent reply and a top-down organization, as seen in Tables 1A and 1B.

After analyzing each response for the various elements of a topic sentence, propositions of advantages and disadvantages, and supporting elaboration, as well as checking for a change of the task from that of comparing advantages and disadvantages to that of giving and supporting an opinion, we grouped samples according to patterns that emerged. What we found was a continuum of structural differences that could be characterized as shown in Table 5. These descriptions, still in various stages of development, are based on the models 1A and 1B we proposed earlier, and show where learners diverge from them. We should note that these categories should not be seen as tied to the ACTFL Guide-

lines. We have grouped them into three classes, labeled High, Mid, and Low, with three subcategories within each. On one end of the continuum we see a very complete response, including topic sentence, advantages and disadvantages of both referents, and a conclusion, all presented in a logical manner and approximating one of our two models. Then, at the High- level we see a topic sentence but fewer propositions than in the High+ and High-Mid levels. The testee may also have changed the topic sentence from a statement that there are advantages and disadvantages to a statement of an opinion about which one is better (for example, *Hay muchas ventajas y desventajas, pero yo creo que la bicicleta es mejor por varias razones* 'There are many advantages and disadvantages, but I think that the bicycle is better for various reasons'). The response, however, includes advantages and disadvantages of both referents.

In the next two levels the testees commonly change the task from that of comparing advantages and disadvantages to that of giving and supporting an opinion. This change in task is understandable if one considers that, by stating a preference for one referent, such as bicycles, the testee can avoid having to account for the advantages and disadvantages of both referents, thus simplifying the task. In the Mid+ level, the task is changed and the testees state propositions actually supporting only one side of an opinion. The Mid-Mid testees give fewer advantages and disadvantages, or only present either advantages or disadvantages. There is a notable lack of development in the ideas, so that the testee seems to

Table 5
Characteristics of the Three Proficiency Levels and Their Subcategories for Comparing Advantages and Disadvantages

	<u>High (More Complete)</u>
High+	Has topic sentence, both advantages and disadvantages of each referent, and a conclusion, in a coherent and cohesive organization, closely following and completing an organizational model (as in 1A or 1B).
High-Mid	Has topic sentence and several advantages and disadvantages, in a coherent presentation of ideas, following a partially complete organizational model.
High-	Has topic sentence and some advantages and disadvantages are given. One or two propositions may not fit tightly in a coherent

(Continued)

Table 5 *(Continued)*

	presentation of ideas. Possible change of task from comparison of advantages and disadvantages to stating and supporting an opinion.
	Mid (Fairly Complete)
Mid+	Has topic sentence, but changes task to that of stating and supporting an opinion. Several propositions are given that really support only one side of the argument.
Mid-Mid	Has topic sentence, but changes task to that of supporting an opinion. Response not complete, either with too few propositions expressing advantages and disadvantages or only a presenting a few advantages or disadvantages. Lacks development of response either because of too much elaboration on only one or two points or extraneous material inserted that does not directly support the reply.
Mid-	Has topic sentence but changes task to an opinion, with some advantages and disadvantages that are not logical or consistent in their support of the opinion.
	Low (More Skeletal)
Low+	Has topic sentence, but there are some incoherencies in the sample, either in the statements of the advantages and disadvantages or in the development of the response.
Low-Mid	Has topic sentence, but answer is incomplete, with few advantages and disadvantages. Some statements are incoherent and difficult to follow in logic. Language difficulties in vocabulary and grammar notably affect the ability to answer.
Low-	May or may not have topic sentence. Answer is incomplete due to difficulties in vocabulary and grammar, with perhaps only one advantage and/or disadvantage.

be simply listing. The Mid- level gives some advantages and/or disadvantages that do not support the topic sentence well, so one sees here the beginning of some problems of logic and consistency.

Problems of logic and consistency are seen notably in the Low level of testees. Difficulties with the

vocabulary and grammar definitely affect the testees' ability to answer the stimuli at all. Some statements are incoherent, and the logic of the propositions is difficult to follow. At the low end of the continuum, the response may or may not have a topic sentence, and perhaps only one or two propositions are stated in the 2 minutes allotted.

Of the 24 included in this study, the testees were divided as shown in Table 6. Most of the testees placed in the Mid level, and relatively few in the Low level.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

Grading oral production is a problem for all levels of foreign language teachers, especially at the more advanced levels, where we often encounter learners who have different backgrounds and prior experiences with the target language. In a conversation course, the teacher faces the problem of grading the learners' achievement for that course and not their level of proficiency, although the ultimate goal, which is not always attainable in a single semester, is to see some gain in proficiency. If one grades oral proficiency alone, then those students who have a relatively high level of proficiency prior to taking the course—from having traveled abroad or by heritage, for example—will almost always demonstrate a higher level of proficiency than those without such a background,

Table 6
Divisions of the 24 Testees According to the Grading Criteria

High		Mid		Low	
Level	No. of Testees	Level	No. of Testees	Level	No. of Testees
High+	2	Mid+	3	Low+	2
High-Mid	4	Mid-Mid	6	Low-Mid	1
High-	2	Mid-	3	Low-	1

and they may not have to study for the course at all. On the other hand, if one grades only on the attainment of particular knowledge of the course content, then the teacher cannot grade the test results in a holistic manner. Often, this focus on particular knowledge means that the teacher downplays the importance of what the learners are actually saying in their responses.

What we propose is that the advanced conversation teacher grade for both proficiency and achievement. In some respects, we are proposing a new kind of prochievement test, but not in the sense that the learner must show knowledge of discrete items. Instead, the learner must demonstrate proficiency in performing given functions, such as comparing advantages and disadvantages, in a cohesive, coherent, and organized manner. It follows, then, that, since course tests must reflect what is taught, a large part of the learner's achievement should be mastery of organizational structure. This focus then implies that an important component of the advanced conversation course be teaching good organizational templates for the tasks targeted at the Advanced and higher levels, such as those seen in the models of Tables 1A and 1B. If learners can be given a set of discourse templates that they can rely on to fill in propositions and if teachers listen for their skill in applying those templates, then we believe the learners will have better guidance in producing top-down and, hopefully, fairly complete answers.

These templates can be easily learned. In our course there was a de-emphasis of vocabulary specific to a given topic, since the TOPT confronts the learner with any topic related in any general way to what Spanish teachers in the U.S. would need to know or say in their teaching. In a typical (non-TOPT) advanced conversation course, however, the teacher could also teach and test for specific vocabulary, such as connective adverbials. We would hope, nevertheless, that discourse structure be considered one of the most, if not *the* most, important element to be mastered in the course.

One may argue that these templates are the same as those used in English and, therefore, we are not teaching the learners anything new. Experience, as well as our data, however, has shown that learners do not follow these frameworks under pressure in the target language. Learning how to express a topic sentence in a foreign language is a challenge, especially one that is clear and to the point of the question and that presents a good proposition for development.

Finally, we are proposing to move the basis of testing for the conversation class to the level of the discourse itself, thereby contextualizing the vocabulary and discrete grammar points. Learners can produce more coherent speech, and those who already have a fairly good oral proficiency upon entering the course can sound even more polished and articulate. Our recommendation for a top-down structured approach to discourse assessment is based on our encouragement of a top-down approach to the four skills of listening comprehension, reading, writing, and, as we have discussed here, speaking.

NOTES

1 One could argue that the logical conclusion to a response comparing advantages and disadvantages is an opinion and, in fact, that is how the model answers conclude in 1A and 1B. The question in the stimulus itself ("What

do you think?") may also seem to elicit an opinion, despite the emphasis on comparing advantages and disadvantages. In such a perspective, the organization would seem to be bottom-up, rather than top-down, with the opinion stated at the end. We point out, however, that an opinion is not the objective of the task, and that this task is answered most successfully with a topic sentence at the very beginning that guides the construction of the rest of the response. Moreover, testees rarely have time to give a conclusion at the end of their response, a fact that would also argue against a bottom-up analysis.

2 The notations used in the transcriptions are those found in Atkinson and Heritage (1984).

3 These translations do not show errors such as vocabulary or agreement errors.

REFERENCES

American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. (1997). *ACTFL provisional revised speaking guidelines*. Yonkers, NY: ACTFL.

Atkinson, M., & Heritage, J. (1989). *Structures of social action*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Higgs, T. (1987). Oral proficiency testing and its significance for practice. *Theory into Practice, 26* (4), 282-287.

Hendrickson, J. (1992). Creating listening and speaking prochievement tests. *Hispania, 75* (5), 1326-1331.

Stansfield, C. (1993). An approach to performance testing of oral language proficiency for bilingual education teacher certification. *Proceedings of the Third National Research Symposium on Limited English Proficiency Student Issues: Focus on middle and high school issues*. Vol. 1. 187-215.

Stansfield, C., & Kenyon, D. (1992). Research on the comparability of the SOPI and the OPI. *System, 20*, 347-364.